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ABSTRACT

The relationship between educational textbook publishers and parents has, in the past, been restricted to parents glancing at their children's textbooks. Now, however, as a result of a general increase of interest in education, the schools' need for parental help in the learning process, and the increased instructional focus of the media (such as Sesame Street), parents want to have instructional materials for home use. Educational publishers, whose main customers have been schools, will now have to modify their publications and advertising to include parents. Exactly how educational publishers will react to this new situation is uncertain, but it is clear that parents are going to have an increased voice in American education. (AL)

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Parents Publishers & Reading

By implication, the title, Parent, Publishers and Reading, indicates that some sort of a relationship exists among the three topics. Now there is certainly a common bond or relationship between publishers and reading. And there also exists a relationship between parents and reading. However, it does not follow that because of this mutual interest that a relationship or even communication exists between parents and publishers.

Let me qualify this to the extent that when I say publishers I am referring to educational or textbook publishers specifically - i.e. those publishers or publishing divisions whose products are primarily directed to and developed for the school market.

And, as long as I am qualifying let me also indicate here that I am not a spokesman for the educational publishing industry. Rather, my remarks should be interpreted as coming from a parent who formerly taught reading in the public schools and who currently is working in educational publishing.

This curious non-relationship between parents and publishers is interesting and paradoxical enough that it invites some comment. However, as in all absolutes, there are variations, so let's talk about those first. The most usual example of parent awareness of a textbook publisher is naturally enough - through the product - the textbook. This contact usually takes the form of a bewildered and frustrated parent rapidly racing through four chapters of a modern

math textbook in order to learn enough to help a frustrated and bewildered child complete an assignment in chapter five. Tears are often a part of this activity-often on both sides. While the point is obvious, I will defend textbook publishers to the extent of pointing out that children's textbooks were never designed to assist the parent in homework assignments. Whether or not textbooks should perform this function is another matter.

Another example of the relationship between parents and publishers occurs in these cases where PTA's purchase instructional materials for school use. In these instances, publishers' representatives often demonstrate the materials and/or equipment to the interested PTA group. Since the PTA in this instance is performing a school function, the publisher treats the parental group exactly as though it were a committee of school people involved in the purchasing process.

Occasionally, parents become aware of educational publishers through the popular media. As an example, the parent corporation of Borg-Warner Educational Systems, advertised System 80 reading programs during the prime-time First Tuesday series on television. These advertisements evoked a number of parental requests for information to which we responded. However, since we market only to schools, we're not at all sure what effect this type of advertising had upon acceptance and dissemination of our programs.

Some publishers, aware of the fact that parents are vitally interested in the education process, have developed parent guides to accompany their textual material. However, it is entirely up to the individual schools whether or not they wish to use this approach in learning.

I have no information on the acceptance of these types of publications, but I suspect it to be minimal.

If you are wondering by now why the educational publishers have not been more active in their activities with parents, let me assure you that it is not because of any innate shyness found in the breed. The home market is both immense and inviting, and many textbook publishers have eyed it with warmth and yearning. The most important factor that has kept them from being more involved in this area is the familar though often maligned motivating force - fear.

Rightly or wrongly, most educational publishers believe that their principle customers, the schools, would be offended if they, the publishers, offered instructional products directly to the home market. Most educational publishers are convinced that they would absolutely and unequivocally lose their school markets if they were to stress sales to parents of the same texts and materials used in the schools.

Generally, the feeling is that schools are so proprietary about the use of instructional materials that they would immediately cease using any materials that were freely available to parents for non-school use.

I want to be very specific - I am not sure that this attitude truly reflects the situation, i. e. I don't know whether or not schools would quickly abandon widely available texts that were used in the home. I do know that most educational publishers feel this to be true and consequently act accordingly in their marketing strategies.

Whether or not this is a good or reasonable situation is, of course, debatable and should make for some interesting discussion.

Are there changes coming about? Will there in the future be more of an effort on the part of the traditional educational publisher to sell to the home market?

I think so. I see more of two things: One: More parents are getting involved in the educational process because they want to - not because they've been asked; and, two: More schools are actively seeking the aid of the home - not simply in a general supportive sense but for assistance in specific instructional tasks such as tutoring in basic reading.

I think that there are several reasons for this change. We are, as a nation, becoming more educated. More of us are finishing high school and college. And, as we become parents deeply interested in the education of children, we are not as reluctant to actually help or become involved in the learning processes as our less educated parents were. We just don't have the awe of schools and teachers that existed in previous generations.

Also, more schools are actively seeking parental help in the learning process as they realize that current budget limitations restrict the amount of individualized instruction that they can give to children. They need and are asking for help.

Another factor causing change, although I cannot assess its impact yet, is the increasing exposure of our children to mass media whose focus is quite frankly instructional. The most obvious example at this time is Sesame Street.

The producers of programs of this type have not stopped to ask the schools whether or not it is desirable to teach young children beginning reading skills or what is the best means of doing this. They are going ahead and doing it according to their own ideas. And if parents see that their children can learn from this TV experience, then they are going to be interested in aiding

and hastening the process even more. And early evidence seems to show that some learning is taking place that can be ascribed to the impact of the media.

Now, how will textbook publishers react to this changing situation? Most of them, quite naturally, will attempt to satisfy the desires of parents for instructional materials that can be used to effectively tutor children in the home or non-school situation, so long as they don't endanger their prime source of customers - the schools. Most publishers, including Borg-Warner, are currently looking very closely at this area for development of new materials.

While I think most educational publishers will continue to market their texts primarily to the schools, I also think that they will make more of an effort to use their school experience and reputation to sell more actively to the home and parent. As to what should be the proper role of the publisher in this area, I think that is something open to further discussion in which the interest and concerns of parents must be taken into account on a much larger scale then ever before.

I think that the shape and force of American education for a long time to come is going to be heavily influenced by what happens in the next few years. And I also think, that as a group, parents are demanding and are going to get more of a voice in what is going to happen.